

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Campylobacter

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What is campylobacter?

Campylobacter is a germ (a bacterium) that can infect the bowel in people and animals. The disease it causes (called “campylobacteriosis”) is one of the most common causes of infection of the bowel in the U.S. Most people infected with campylobacter do not get serious medical problems. However, in rare cases the infection can spread to other parts of the body such as the blood.

What are the symptoms of campylobacteriosis?

The most common symptoms are diarrhea (sometimes bloody), abdominal (stomach) pain, tiredness, fever, nausea, and vomiting. These symptoms can start within one to ten days, but most often will show up within two to five days, after the germs have been swallowed. In otherwise healthy people, the symptoms usually last one to four days, but sometimes longer. If you have any of these symptoms, see a doctor.

How is campylobacter spread?

The campylobacter germ must be swallowed to cause disease. This usually happens when someone eats food that has been contaminated with campylobacter and has not been well cooked or pasteurized (treated to kill germs). It also can happen if someone drinks contaminated water. Campylobacter is found in the stool (feces) of infected people. Campylobacteriosis can be spread from one person to another if an infected person prepares food for other people without thoroughly washing his or her hands after using the toilet. The infection sometimes spreads in day-care centers and other institutions because very young children and disabled adults may not always be able to wash their hands well. People can also be infected by their pets, especially puppies and kittens.

What kinds of food are most likely to be contaminated?

Campylobacter is most commonly found in uncooked food products from animals, such as poultry (chicken, turkey, etc.), and in unpasteurized milk. Some people have been infected by eating raw shellfish. However, thorough cooking or pasteurizing will kill the bacteria and make these foods safe to eat.

Can campylobacter be spread by animals?

Yes! Campylobacter has been found in the stool (feces) of infected farm animals and pets (including cattle, poultry, cats and dogs), whether they are sick or healthy. The bacteria have also been found in different kinds of wild animals. Therefore, you should wash your hands well with soap and water after touching animals or their stools.

How is campylobacteriosis diagnosed and treated?

Your doctor, nurse, or health center must send your stool sample to a laboratory. The lab then grows germs from it and tests them to see if any of the germs are campylobacter. It takes several days to do this test. Most people get well without any treatment, but some people can get very sick. If you think you or someone in your family has this disease, see a doctor or go to a health center as soon as you can. People who get very sick for longer than usual, or whose work or living situations make it likely that their infection will spread to others, are usually treated with antibiotics.

How can you prevent campylobacteriosis?

The two most important things to remember are that the germ can only make you sick if you swallow it and that thorough cooking will kill it. Be extra careful when using food products from animals. Follow the tips below; if you make them habits, you can prevent campylobacteriosis, as well as other diseases:

- Always wash your hands **thoroughly** with soap and water before eating, before handling food, after using the toilet, after changing diapers, and after handling your pets or cleaning up after them.
- Cook all food from animal sources thoroughly, especially poultry. If the meat or poultry is still pink in the center, it is not thoroughly cooked.
- Use only clean utensils, dishes and cutting boards to prepare food that is already cooked or will be eaten raw. Anything you use to prepare raw meat, seafood, or poultry, including your hands and the table or counter top, should be washed **thoroughly** before you touch any other food.
- Do not eat raw shellfish or unpasteurized dairy products (such as cheese). Do not drink unpasteurized milk or eat anything made with unpasteurized milk.
- Do not drink from untreated water supplies when you go camping or hiking.
- If you are taking care of someone who has campylobacteriosis or diarrhea, scrub your hands with plenty of soap and water after cleaning the bathroom, helping the person use the toilet, or changing diapers, soiled clothes or soiled sheets.
- If you or your child has persistent diarrhea (with or without a fever), or if the diarrhea is very bad, call your doctor or health center for advice.

Are there any health regulations for people with campylobacteriosis?

Yes. Because campylobacteriosis is a disease that can easily spread to other people, health care providers are required by law to report cases of campylobacteriosis to the local board of health.

In order to protect the public, workers at food-related businesses who have campylobacteriosis must stay out of work until they don't have diarrhea and one lab test on a stool sample shows that there are no campylobacter germs. Workers in food-related businesses who have diarrhea and live with someone who has campylobacteriosis must also show that they have no campylobacter germs in their stool. Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, supermarkets, dairy or food-processing plants. This regulation also includes workers in schools, residential programs, day-care and health facilities who feed, give mouth care or dispense medications to clients.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under “government”)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850, or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>

Updated October 1996